



# Preparing for ODA Level Initial Entry UW Operations in Korea

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In March 2013, the Republic of Korea and U.S. forces assumed an increased alert level as “North Korea continued to intensify its aggressive rhetoric ahead of March 11, when Pyongyang said it would withdraw from the 1953 Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War. In addition to annulling the armistice, Pyongyang said it would shut down its military hotlines with Seoul and ignore its non-aggression pact with South Korea.”<sup>1</sup> The increased alert level was initially due to North Korea’s underground missile test on Feb. 12, 2013. ROK and U.S. forces, not to be bullied by the North, went ahead with plans for Joint Chiefs of Staff Exercise Foal Eagle 2013, against the requests of the North Korean government. Projected against the canvas of an untested, aggravated and belligerent state actor with limited weapons of mass destruction capability was Balance Knife 13-1, a joint combined exchange training exercise serving as the initial-entry force for the strategic mission of FE-13. Contrary to initial-entry operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, BK13-1 was not an initial entry operation that took place after a period of relative peace (the 1980s and ‘90s). This article intends to address the challenges that Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alphas,

accustomed to numerous Central Command combat rotations, might encounter if tasked to conduct unconventional warfare in the Korean Theater of Operations. It uses the OIF/OEF environments as a benchmark from which to compare two dissimilar operational environments. It also intends to highlight the challenges an ODA might confront if tasked with the KTO problem set.

BK13-1 was a two team (ODAs 1336 and 1333 from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.) JCET from February to March 2013 at Iksan and Damyang, Republic of Korea. The JCET developed the capability of the 7th and 11th ROK Special Forces Brigades with regard to UW in support of potential contingency operations in the KTO. The JCET culminated in a three-day UW exercise that put into practice a month’s worth of ROK- U.S. combined UW training. While preparing for simulated combined UW operations in Korea, ROK and U.S. Special Forces operators were faced with challenges that forced the combined team to reexamine initial entry operations with respect to common doctrinal framework, infiltration, movement in a denied area, logistics, communications and MEDEVAC in effect, going back to the roots of the Special Forces Regiment.

The last 13 years of constant conflict in the mature theaters of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Philippines has brought to light the need for an aggressive course correction if U.S. forces ever hope to successfully execute UW operations as a strategic option in the KTO. The U.S. military has come to associate the “super forward operating base” concept with a new normal in the western way of war. The ubiquity of establishments like Burger King, Green Bean and an abundance of civilian-support personnel has fundamentally changed the way the U.S. military views expeditionary warfare, and ultimately UW. This mindset becomes problematic when U.S. Special Forces attempt to overlay the last 13 years of combat experience into a UW environment, specifically the KTO UW environment.

The KTO provides a myriad of challenges to UW operations. ODAs that took part in BK 13-1 were forced to reconsider much of what they have become accustomed to over the last 13 years, and transition back to the self-sustaining force multiplier the ODA was designed to be. BK13-1, by design, exercised traditional SF operations in that two ODAs set the conditions for the arrival of a special operations task force, rather than the post 9/11 atmosphere in which ODAs deploy only to be assigned under pre-existing SOTFs. In short, UW operations require the ODA to assume more risk, sacrifice command and control and delegate to a level not regularly exercised in the post 9/11 environments.

The concept of combined UW is still in its infancy, due in part to USSF’s focus on the CENTCOM area of responsibility over the last decade. It is no surprise that in the period of decreased emphasis on the Korean problem set that ROKSF has come to define its fundamental role in KTO contingency operations differently compared to their U.S. counterparts. The U.S. definition of UW is specific in that it defines UW as “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area.”<sup>2</sup> The ODAs observed that the ROKSF definition is more all encompassing in that they view all operations conducted by Special Forces in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as UW operations. The resulting disparity in the definition of UW had the potential to generate stumbling blocks while preparing to operate as a combined element. The first challenge



**LIFESAVER** A U.S. Special Forces medic assists ROK Special Forces during a Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) exercise. *U.S. Army photo.*

faced by the ODAs was the development of a common doctrinal and operational framework. Not necessarily indoctrinating ROKSF with U.S. doctrine and practice but instead finding a middle ground from which to begin to work through the differences.

Combined UW in the Korean context provides USSF a distinct high-end capability. Korean culture is complex, and as a result not easy to prepare for operations. A counterpart that speaks the language and understands the complexity of Korean culture is invaluable to the ODA. Also, the division of Korea is not so old that it transcends pre Military Demarcation Line familial relationships. Many ROKSF soldiers still have family in the north that they may or may not maintain contact with. These divided families provide strong relationships that transcend NK ideology and can serve as a foundation for the development of a loyal resistance organization.

ODAs conducted a reassessment of infiltration methods and the various risks the KTO poses to each. ODAs were first forced to rethink the primacy of rotary-wing infiltration. The last 10 years has forced ODAs to work around aviation timelines due to competing interests in theater. Just the opposite is the case in the UW context. Concrete times for planning can be hard to come by, as most

coordination is done last minute to prevent compromise, requiring most air crews to be on standby. There is less room for deviation with regard to air corridors and landing zones due to a robust Air Defense Artillery threat. More than likely, during the initial stages of a UW campaign, air movement would be limited to infiltration only, due to the risk to personnel and mission that air movement presents. The subsequent option of crossing borders as multiple elements at various locations with indigenous vehicles requires the ODA to assume considerably more risk. ODA leadership must be prepared to manage longer periods of radio silence as a result of the mountainous terrain and KTO intercept capability. A drastic reduction in battle command capability stands in stark contrast to the OIF/OEF mindset. This massive assumption of risk on behalf of the ODA and SOTF is in direct response to the technical and tactical capabilities a large standing conventional army poses to a UW task force.

The ODAs also rethought movement inside a denied area. The KTO is dominated by mountainous terrain with very few trees due to rampant deforestation over the past 50 years. Davis Halberstam notes in his work “The Coldest Winter” on the Korean War that “The Americans and their UN allies faced

terrible, mountainous terrain, which worked against their advantage in hardware, most notably their armored vehicles, and offered caves and other forms of shelter to the enemy.”<sup>3</sup> As a result of the terrain and the threat’s capabilities, combined UW teams are forced to work almost exclusively at night to avoid compromise. Distances covered by foot are miniscule compared to the vast distances covered during the mounted desert operations that have dominated post 9/11 environments. Attempting movement by vehicle through an auxiliary also poses a significant risk to personnel and mission. The mountainous terrain and underdeveloped civil infrastructure in likely UW environments allow a single checkpoint to control substantial amounts of territory. If that movement in a denied area with an indigenous resistance force results in enemy contact, then assets such as a quick reaction force and readily available indirect fires and close-air support will be the exception rather than the rule, as is the case in the OIF/OEF environments.

MEDEVAC operations in a UW environment unfortunately compel ODAs to divorce themselves from the dependence on the “golden hour.” “The Golden Hour is defined as the time period of one hour in which the lives of a majority of critically injured trauma patients can be saved if definitive surgical intervention is provided.”<sup>4</sup> The “golden hour” is a testament to how far we have come as a military in our transportation and treatment of wounded servicemen, but poorly translates into UW initial entry operations. The ability to evacuate wounded personnel within one hour requires a large scale U.S. or coalition footprint. For the ODA operating in a denied area, the “golden day” or “golden week” is in all probability a more realistic time frame. During the initial-entry stage in the KTO, the movement of wounded personnel will be from inside a denied area, across a border, to a secure area by clandestine means. The comparison in this case being the post 9/11 environment in which MEDEVAC assets are pushed to the team rather than the team developing internal assets and pushing wounded personnel to higher levels of care. More responsibility will inevitably be placed in the hands of the detachment medic. The post 9/11 environment has not exercised the 18D MOS to its full potential with regard to long-term patient care because of a robust medical footprint. In the UW framework, the 18D will be required to develop a medical treatment/MEDEVAC infrastructure, complete with



supplies, treatment facilities and capable of sustaining life under austere conditions.

ODAs were forced to look internally for their logistical infrastructure rather than externally in the OIF/OEF environment. As the U.S. military transitions from the large OIF/OEF logistical footprint, predictable resupply via ground or air will be tough during the initial stages of a UW campaign.

Logistical resupply will be especially difficult in a society that has weathered decades of food shortages. Detachment engineers, just like the 18Ds, will be forced to develop their own infrastructure rather than rely on a predictable theater resupply system. By in large, our force is excellent at working through mature theater provided systems. The challenge the ODA will confront is the development of sustainable infrastructure that can supply the combined UW team, but also provides for the growth of an indigenous resistance organization.

Communications, in the form of effective and articulate reporting is essential to a successful combined UW campaign. The post 9/11 reliance on large scale information-technology systems (both unclassified and classified), satellite communications and line-of-sight communications has created an insatiable appetite at higher echelons for information. Terrain, intercept capability, satellite communications and even cell phones should all be considered when developing a communications plan. Inevitably the communications architecture during initial-entry will not be capable of delivering the massive amounts of near real-time information SOTF staffs have become accustomed to.

By in large, the U.S. military has had very little need to counter a robust intercept capability possessed by large standing armies. Every communication, internal or external, needs to be assessed for risk to personnel and mission. Each time a communication is made and a signal is transmitted, the ODA is putting itself, their counterparts and their resistance organization at risk. The development of multifaceted communications architecture at the ODA level is a necessity.

The OIF/OEF communications architecture is such that in almost all cases constant communications are available in some form. With the risk to personnel and mission that each transmission represents, there will inevitably be a cultural shift in the way we conduct tactical communications. Lt. Col. Mark Grdovic notes in his article "Developing a Common Understanding of Unconventional Warfare"



**MISSION PLANNING** A Special Forces engineer sergeant teaches a communications class to his ROK Special Forces counterparts. U.S. Army photo.

that, "the higher the level of command, the greater the factors of space, time and force, the greater the importance of the commanders intent."<sup>5</sup> So in the case of initial entry operations, broad weekly guidance from a SOTF is more realistic than the daily, and in some cases real time, guidance of our current environment. This lack of communication is a double-edged sword for the ODAs on the ground. While the ODA gains significantly more autonomy, they also lose the enormous support structure that a SOTF can provide.

BK 13-1 only initially defined the intricate problems facing the Korean Peninsula. As the war in Afghanistan comes to a close, the regionally aligned SF groups will again focus their emphasis on their AORs. Persistent engagement that develops a common doctrinal and operational framework with regard to UW instruction, infiltration, movement, logistics, communications and MEDEVAC is the only way to effectively master combined ROK-U.S. UW. The KTO is arguably the last bastion of conventional conflict with two large standing armies prepared for war at a moment's notice. A combined ROK and U.S. UW campaign provides the UN Combined Forces Command with a strategic-level asset adept at solving the complex cultural, ideological and operational problems that define the KTO. **SW**

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## Notes

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